

The Qualitative Evaluation of the JSA Intervention Regime Pilots

By Judith Eccles and Richard Lloyd

Background

This report provides the findings of the qualitative component of the JSA Intervention Regime Pilots evaluation strategy, undertaken by GHK Consulting for the Department for Work and Pensions. The pilots were introduced in January 2005 to test different approaches within the first 13 weeks of the JSA regime, with 13 Districts and 138 offices participating at the outset. The pilots aimed to deliver resource savings without reducing unemployment off-flow rates or increasing negative or other unintended consequences such as fraud and the failure to report changes of circumstances.

Six approaches were piloted – five relating to signing and one seeking to predict which new customers were likely to leave the register within the first 13 weeks, as follows:

- Excusal of signing for the first 13 weeks of the JSA claim – with a random call-in (RCI) during the first 13 weeks of the claim.
- Excusal of signing for the first six weeks/first three signing events – again, with random call-in during the first 13 weeks of the claim.
- Telephone signing (TFJR) – with customers signing on fortnightly by telephone, with random call-in during the first 13 weeks of the claim.
- Shortened FJR (SFJR) – with customers continuing to sign on fortnightly, but with a shortened FJR.
- Group signing – with customers continuing to sign on fortnightly, but doing so in groups, in a similar manner to Group Restart interviews.

- Virtual screening – with new customers being screened at the first NJI using a specially developed tool, and signing arrangements remaining unchanged.

With the exception of the virtual screening pilots, new customers claiming JSA during the pilot period were allocated on a random basis to either 'programme' or 'control groups', with the excusal and telephone pilots including random call-ins for programme customers in the first 13 weeks of their claims.

The pilot evaluation strategy consisted of three components – a work study to identify administrative savings and a quantitative component featuring the analysis of off-flow data and the qualitative component.

The qualitative study

The qualitative study sought to identify issues associated with the implementation of the pilots, and identify the factors underpinning pilot performance and other impacts. The study was based on a series of visits to all 13 pilot Districts and 23 case study offices, and featured qualitative interviews with District and office staff and a sample of programme and control group customers.

The qualitative study identified a series of pilot impacts, although these were based largely on staff perceptions in the absence of the requirement for more formalised monitoring procedures. Many of these reflected staff concerns at the start of the pilots, although they were rarely set in a comparative context (i.e. impacts for the programme group versus the control, or against

'normal' FJR procedures). Staff across the case study offices described incidents of reduced job-entries, increased fraud and delayed reporting of changes of circumstances amongst the programme group.

The customer interviews included questions on contact durations for the programme and control groups, referring to the length of SFJRs and telephone FJRs, group signing sessions and RCIs for the excusal pilots. Although in some cases based on small samples, these were found to be within the 90 per cent confidence limits identified in the Work Study. They showed that the contact durations for the programme group were longest for the excusal RCIs (which were considerably longer than for the control or 'standard' FJR), with group signers reporting the shortest contact periods (less than for the SFJRs).

Both staff and customer interviews allowed impacts on customer attitudes and behaviour to be explored – although the number and distribution of customer interviews by pilot and between programme and control groups means that their findings should be treated as indicative. The reduction or loss of contact with Jobcentre Plus was found to reduce awareness of the responsibility to report changes of circumstance and the level of jobsearch activity – although to different extents by pilot type. Staff considered that the pilots had impacted negatively on customers' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities under JSA, particularly regarding changes of circumstances. The customer interviews found little difference between the programme and control groups in the awareness of the actions needed to claim JSA – although only four per cent remembered the requirement to report changes of circumstance.

The findings

The findings for each pilot type are summarised below.

13-week Excusal Pilot: The 13 week excusal model was piloted in three Districts and 17 offices, and implemented broadly in accordance with the national guidance. Examples of communications issues were identified, including failure to identify programme group customers at the NJI leading to

claims being closed following non-attendance. Staff also considered the process for contacting customers for RCIs was too short, and dependant on telephone contacts.

Staff perceptions of the impact of the pilot reflected their initial concerns regarding reduced job submissions and change of circumstance reporting, and increased FTA rates and fraud. However, it was not clear if these were greater than would be expected under the standard regime. Expected reductions in footfall associated with the pilot had not been realised, with time savings not being readily identified as they were experienced on a piece-meal basis. Staff considered that the pilot would be inappropriate and disadvantageous for many customers – particularly those facing labour market disadvantage or needing support with jobsearch.

The JUVOS data suggests this pilot exerted a significant negative influence on off-flow rates, and while the differences between programme and control groups varied in all pilot Districts they were consistently negative. This suggests that the scale of savings realised would be unlikely to match the additional benefit costs resulting.

Six-week Excusal Pilot: The six-week excusal model was piloted with three Districts and 28 offices, with the findings reflecting those of the 13-week pilot. Staff concerns were also similar, although they considered that the shorter excusal period offered less opportunity for unreported changes of circumstance and so overpayments.

Impacts were largely based on staff perceptions, although the eight week FJRs had identified examples of unreported employment entry. In some offices a reduction in footfall was reported (although the extent to which this was due to the effects of the pilot was unclear), and time savings were not easily identified. However, some had estimated time savings of approximately 30 minutes per FJR staff member per day. As with the 13-week excusal, the JUVOS data showed considerable differences in off-flow rates between the programme and control groups, although the programme group fared better under the six-week pilot than the 13-week. Nevertheless, the scale of savings was considered to be unlikely to outweigh the additional benefit costs.

Telephone FJR (TFJR): The telephone FJR approach was piloted in three Districts and 53 offices, and proved the most challenging to implement. Single office and centralised models were followed, with the centralised approach allowing calls to be taken by any office. This proved particularly challenging to operate, requiring the development of new systems and administrative procedures to eliminate miscommunication. Across the pilots, the skills of the telephone signer (and their ability to ‘multi-task’ between conversing with customers, conducting job search and complete administrative tasks) were considered to be central to effectiveness.

While initially envisaged as offering the greatest potential for time savings, the model also raised the greatest concerns over fraud outside the excusal pilots. Individual examples of fraud were reported, and job submissions and entries were also reportedly down, although their scale was unclear. Late signing and FTAs were also an issue for the pilot – with FTA procedures being confusing for staff and customers, taking up time and leading to the view that some customers were being offered a ‘second chance’.

Time savings were felt to be potentially considerable, particularly under the centralised model, although they were rarely quantified – although in one case two members of staff were reported as being responsible for signing 600 customers across three offices. However, the JUVOS data showed a considerable difference between off-flow rates between programme and control groups, suggesting that extra benefit costs combined with resources needed for implementation would be unlikely to match any saving made.

Shortened FJR (SFJR): The SFJR model was piloted in two Districts and with ten offices, and was often considered to reflect normal practice in terms of FJR content and coverage.

Incidents of unreported changes of circumstances were described less frequently for the SFJR than the other pilot types, although these were countered by staff concerns over reduced

customer service and reported reductions in job submissions and job-search activity. The latter was also suggested by the customer interviews, which also indicated that awareness of conditionality was the lowest for any of the pilot types. The extent to which time savings were realised under this pilot was unclear, although estimates suggested that each SFJR was taking around five minutes to deliver. Any ‘savings’ were discounted in two case study offices by staffing shortages, although the third reported that no real savings had resulted.

The SFJR pilot appeared to have a minimal negative influence on off-flows according to the JUVOS data, and small differences between the programme and control groups. However concerns were identified regarding the differential treatment of programme and control groups and the extent to which time savings had been achieved.

Group Signing: The group signing pilot was implemented in a single office, and in accordance with the national guidance. Although having the potential to provide considerable time savings, programme customers took a passive role in group sessions, discussion and questioning was not encouraged to keep sessions short, and the grouping of customers by similar characteristics was not attempted. Some staff also considered that the FJR process should remain confidential, and while allowing messages to be communicated effectively staff found varying the topics covered challenging.

While placing an additional load on enquiry points to address customer questions, the ability to work with groups of 12 suggested that large time savings could be realised. The office estimated that over seven hours of FJR time per week was saved across 108 customers – although the estimate excluded preparation and recording time.

Although staff considered that job submissions amongst the programme group had fallen, the JUVOS data showed there to be little difference between the off-flow rates for the programme and control groups. However, the pilot was not considered practical for wider implementation by office staff for a range of content, customer service, space and health and safety reasons.

Virtual Screening: The virtual screening model was piloted in three Districts and 32 offices, although variations in implementation were identified amongst the case study offices. Staff in many cases were found to have followed a more subjective and discretionary approach to the use of the segmentation tool, and had not always followed the steps sequentially. However, the JUVOS data suggests that in broad terms customer off-flow rates followed those predicted for the 'red', 'green' and 'amber' categories. However, the degree of accuracy in this pilot was not sufficient to allow for the future possibility of targeting interventions. The screening tool if applied would result in false positives and false negatives, i.e. some of those deemed to be short durations would in fact be long durations and some identified as long durations would in fact be short.

Conclusions

The pilots attempted to identify ways of providing a more efficient JSA signing regime (through less frequent signing, telephone signing, group signing and shortened signing) and to test the effectiveness of the existing regime. The findings indicate that the current Fortnightly Job Review arrangement for new claimants is the most effective at maintaining reported JSA off-flow rates and minimising over-payments.

The in-house quantitative evaluation covered briefly in this report indicates that the potential administrative savings identified through the less frequent signing and telephone signing pilots were more than off-set by longer JSA claim durations and increased benefit payments.

The full report of these research findings is published for the Department for Work and Pensions by Corporate Document Services (ISBN 1 84123 918 6. Research Report 300. November 2005).

It is available from Paul Noakes at the address below.

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Paul Noakes, Strategic Research and Modelling Division, 4th Floor, The Adelphi, 1-11 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6HT.
E-mail: Paul.Noakes@dwp.gsi.gov.uk